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~ Luke 13:10-17 ~

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The Holy Gospel, according to Luke.

Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

Here ends the reading of today's gospel.

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Grace and peace to you in the name of the one who calls, gathers and sends us into the world for the sake of restoration and redemption.

My name is Deacon Michelle Collins. I serve as the Assistant to the Bishop in the MNO Synod. I am grateful to be part of this year's summer sermon series, and I give thanks to the bishops and assistants to the bishops who have shared their reflections and prayers with us

this summer. This sermon series is one way we demonstrate that we are united in our faith and members of the one Body of Christ.

Today I want to especially give thanks for the pastors, youth leaders, and adults who are accompanying and shepherding youth to the Canadian Lutheran/Anglican Youth Gathering in Saskatoon, which is wrapping up today. I hope that you will reach out to youth and adults in your context to hear stories and testimonies of their experience at CLAY.

What is it like to feel bent over and unable to stand up straight? Some of us have experienced spending a few hours in the garden or doing a task that requires us to bend over and then groaning as we stretch into a standing position after a while. Others of us are familiar with the impact and effect of age as we realize that our joints and muscles aren't working the way they used to. Others just learn to live with the bodies that they have, which may not fit the expected norm in one way or another.

But more significantly, I would imagine that all of us know the limitations of perspectives, feelings or experiences that restrict us from leaning into our full selves. As someone who has been taller than most people around me for as long as I can remember, I know that standing up straight is just as much a matter of confidence in your identity as it is a matter of stature and stability. I can hear my mother's voice telling me to stand up straight just as easily as I can feel the embarrassment of standing out in ways I wish I didn't. For me, my tendency to slouch and keep my shoulders bent over in public was a result of embarrassment and self-consciousness about my body. I didn't feel I could stand up straight because of how I thought my height, hair, skin, clothes and shape compared to the common standard. This embarrassment made me nervous to be in public, to speak up, or to draw any unnecessary attention to myself. You could even say I was bent over by a spirit that had crippled me.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath and notices a woman who has been bent over for many years. She was unable to stand up straight. Most scholars suspect this woman was suffering from a physical ailment that was affecting her spine. But it's just as likely that the weight that burdened her was a result of direct and indirect messages and experiences that had informed her sense of who she was.

Our virtual and physical spaces are filled with people who cannot stand up straight for a variety of reasons.

Some are bent over from physical disease and disorder.

Some are bent over from trauma they do not know how to process.

Some are bent over from prejudice and bias against various aspects of their identity.

Some are bent over from their age and what the common opinion is about what value they bring to society.

Some are bent over from generations of internalized shame.

Our world is full of people who are bent over and unable to stand up straight.

And Jesus sees these people. Jesus sees the woman in the synagogue, and Jesus sees you and me.

Jesus' first word to the woman is a word of freedom and validation. "Woman," Jesus says, "you are set free from your ailment." Jesus extends a word of invitation and freedom without hesitation. Later in the story he identifies her as a daughter of Abraham, including her in the family of God and connecting her to God's covenant promise.

How might we do this? How might we create spaces where people who cannot stand up straight in other places hear a word of freedom and inclusion from us? Child, you are free from your ailment. Refugee...widow...victim of trauma...gender diverse sibling...in this space you are free to stand up straight because we see you. You are welcome here. You are part of God's covenant community.

That's what Jesus does. He sees and validates the woman. He declares a word of freedom that invites her beyond her previous sense of herself and into full inclusion in the worshipping community.

The woman is not the only one in need of a word of healing and release. There is someone else in the story in need of healing, but this person is less aware of their ailment. A religious leader, who we can assume is faithful and devout, committed to following the traditions and with a desire to please God, sees what Jesus does and is upset.

Ummm... Jesus...that's not how we do it around here. We have rules and processes that dictate how someone like that is to be treated.

In our context, the religious leader's responses might sound like this: We have classes for her age down the hall. We have a support group for her diagnosis that meets on Tuesday morning in the basement. We can direct her to services where she can get the help she needs. But today she's interrupting our worship and learning.

The religious leaders' objection to both the woman and to Jesus' response to her demonstrates that he was just as in need of restoration and release. He had become so burdened with the rules and rituals that he'd lost the ability to enter freely into the invitation and welcome of worship and community.

Does that happen to us? Do we get so focused on our routines and traditions that we respond negatively to people who come into our spaces that make us uncomfortable? Perhaps we point back to the rules and procedures that have served us—those with privilege and prestige—well. Maybe, if we're honest, we even expect God to abide by our rules and procedures.

But Jesus responds differently. He sees the woman. He initiates connection with her. He speaks to her and declares a word of freedom. He lays his hand on her—a gesture we know as a sign of blessing, anointing, prayer and proclamation.

Today, when an infant, child or adult is presented for baptism, the pastor lays hands on them and offers a word of promise. When someone goes through the rite of confirmation or the affirmation of baptism, we lay hands on them and offer a word of promise and prayer. When we commission someone into a particular role or opportunity, we lay hands and pray for them. When someone is ordained as a pastor or deacon, we lay hands and pray for them.

In these and other times, when we extend a gesture of blessing and a word of promise and prayer, do we realize that we declare a word of healing, freedom and wholeness?

The religious leaders object to what Jesus is saying and doing because it goes against their rules—specifically their commitment to rest on the sabbath. They're not as upset that he healed the woman as that he did it on the sabbath. Jesus uses their argument against them. Today is for rest, you say? This woman cannot rest because of what is keeping her bent over. It is exactly the day of rest that compels me to heal her.

We cannot say we value a day of rest when a person in our gathering is being excluded from that rest. We cannot say we value rest when those who are bound by disease, prejudice, oppression, inequality or our ignorance are excluded from experiencing rest. We cannot say we value rest when some among us are excluded from experiencing that rest because of something that is limiting their wholeness.

In this, Jesus' words and actions become about more than just physical healing. They also become prophetic—convicting and revealing a system that prohibits and limits a full experience of God's intentions for God's people.

By exposing the ways traditions and teachings have become limiting, Jesus shows that the woman is not the only one who is 'bent over' and 'quite unable to stand up straight.' In fact, the entire system needs restoration so that EVERYONE can experience rest—even the religious elite. Jesus' words and actions call the whole system towards freedom and release.

Our communities are filled with people bent over from a spirit that is crippling them. Our systems are bent over from attitudes and beliefs that are crippling us. Jesus desires and proclaims healing and restoration for both. We who profess a commitment to rest are both those in need of healing, and those who are called to participate in making that rest possible.

...rest for children and youth burdened by limiting expectations and assumptions.

...rest for marginalized communities exhausted by the burden of systemic injustice and generational trauma.

...rest for housing and food insecure neighbours exhausted by the burden of finding the very basic necessities for life.

...rest for those exhausted by the burden of labels, prejudice, hatred and exclusion.

...rest for those exhausted from working for justice, reconciliation, and equality for the most vulnerable.

...rest for you and me, exhausted by the burden of grief, loneliness, shame, fear, and insecurity.

Jesus saw the woman who was bent over under the burden of disease. He revealed to the religious leaders that they were bent over under the weight of legalism and tradition, and in need of healing and release. We who are bent over in all kinds of ways need transformation, healing and release. By the goodness and grace of God, Jesus sees us, reaches out to us with love, and declares that we are set free.

“Beloved, you are set free from your ailment.”

Through the waters of baptism, we are washed and made clean. We are set free from the ailment of sin. Through the bread and wine of communion we are fed, nourished and forgiven. We are set free and included in God’s promise of eternal life. As we gather with others and invite everybody to stand up straight, claiming all of who they are and hope to be in our midst, we discover the vastness of God’s welcome and the fullness of God’s rest.

Whatever it is that’s keeping you bent over today, you are seen and loved by the One who knows your name and who stays by your side through the darkness of sin and death. You are seen and loved by the one who defeated the power of death so that you might hear the words “beloved, you are set free from your ailment.”

This week, as you encounter neighbours who are bent over from the burden of life, how might you extend a word and gesture of healing and wholeness? As you bend under the realities of your own brokenness, Jesus sees you and invites you fully into the promise of restoration. As we give and receive the offer of divine rest, I pray we reflect on our own systems, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that have become limiting and need transformation. And I pray that as we live into God’s rest, we hear Christ’s invitation to stand up straight and experience the incredible gift of healing and wholeness.

Thanks be to God. *Amen.*